Communities of Practice Get Underway at Keyport

By Marietta Atwater

Imagine you are trying to "beat the clock" to finalize a proposal, when you hit a roadblock. You need more information about risk management, and your traditional sources are on travel. Since you are pretty familiar with your Community of Practice (CoP) virtual workspace, you just click on the "White Pages" (expertise locator), and initiate a Search for "Risk Management." Tom, Neal, Cathy and Rick are listed as potential contacts. Using the e-mail addresses in the White Pages, you send each of them an urgent message and within minutes you receive a phone call from Rick, the subject matter expert, who supplies the information you need.

What if your automated test equipment is generating an error you haven't seen before? Maybe you are new on the job or just new to the software, but everyone is busy — and you are stuck. Thinking it might be worth a try, you log on to your CoP Web site and find several options in the online collaborative working environment. The "Best Practices" and "Lessons Learned" links capture your attention. Searching for the circuit card by name, you quickly discover one of the senior shop technicians has previously detected the same obscure failure and added it to the Web site. You are off the hook and on to the next task.

At the Naval Undersea Warfare Command (NUWC) Keyport, Wash., building Communities of Practice has been an opportunity to put a great idea into practice. If you aren't on board yet with why CoPs are important, what they can do for you, for your command and for the Navy — and why you will want to be involved — here is a quick overview.

The NUWC Concept of Operations defines CoPs this way: "CoPs are a network of people engaged in a particular profession, occupation or job function, who actively seek to work more effectively, to share knowledge and information relevant to their community and to understand their work more fully. They accomplish this objective by participating in peer reviews (not performance), sharing lessons learned, and jointly addressing emerging challenges and opportunities in their respective areas of specialization."

NUWC's Capt. Dan Looney addressed the topic of CoPs in a letter to supervisors last January, by saying, "…The primary focus of CoPs is the maintenance and improvement of core technical disciplines…. CoPs are focused internally to provide a forum for people who practice within the same discipline to enable knowledge sharing, develop networks and establish common tools. The CoP will become a mechanism for improving our processes, reducing the costs to paying customers and sustaining our core capability…."

Many of you remember Quality Circles, Process Improvement Teams and other quality measures over the years, and may think this is just more of the same. CoPs are different because they are not comprised of a few people trying to make a difference — CoPs allow every employee an opportunity to contribute; the resources (online and person-to-person) help us do our jobs better and as subject matter experts, we are able to help other members of the community do their jobs better through mentoring, problem solving or coming up with a "better idea."

Karen Danis, technical manager for Knowledge Management and Community Builder at Keyport, has taken the lead in helping Keyport CoPs get started by providing training, structure and guidance.

Karen Danis

"I'm delighted to see that NUWC has embraced this proven technique for improving efficiency, effectiveness and innovation. Knowing we have another vehicle for sharing ideas, lessons learned and best practices, and having resources to draw upon, will impact the bottom line and improve our quality of life," said Danis.

Keyport is employing a phased CoP approach. There are 32 Communities of Practice topics identified; however, Keyport has initiated seven CoPs to set the stage for others to follow. NUWC Newport, R.I., is also developing eight CoPs in the same areas, and both divisions will share their expertise, success stories and lessons learned. The CoP leaders and their core members have developed charters for each CoP that define the CoP's purpose, scope and initial focus areas. Hearing from a couple of Keyport's CoP leaders will help you capture the CoP vision and enable you to consider some ideas as to how CoPs can improve your area of expertise.

"The Software Engineering CoP provides developers with a way to share expertise, design methods, standards and even the first building blocks of software products. By harnessing this potential we hope to make development easier and more fun. In the software world this translates into higher quality products and highly productive engineers," said Joe Alyea, Software Engineering CoP Lead.

"The Workforce Development Community develops guidelines and improves processes for the development of our workforce to ensure we maintain and grow our core capabilities," said Mike Lehman, Workforce Development CoP Lead.

When CoPs succeed, we all benefit, not only at Keyport but throughout the greater community of the Department of the Navy!

Atwater is the managing editor of Keynotes, the newsletter of the Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division Keyport. This article has been edited from an original article, which appeared in Keynotes.